

A Dream Curled in the Seed

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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While traveling on the Long Island Railroad in the Summer of 1906, Parker D. King, happened to encounter an old school-mate, Frederic Curtis Brown. Mr. King was a businessman who lived in Summit, New Jersey; Mr. Brown was the Minister of the Unitarian Church in Buffalo, New York. The two old friends fell to talking of this and that. Eventually the conversation began to focus upon the possibility of establishing a liberal church in Summit. No plans were made, but clearly, Mr. Brown did not let the matter drop.

In the autumn of 1906, Mr. King was contacted by an official from the American Unitarian Association, and under his leadership a "Provisional Committee" was established and a series of Unitarian Meetings was scheduled--appropriately enough, in the Odd Fellow's Hall in Summit. The first of these meetings was held on January 27, 1907--just ninety years ago tomorrow. Three Unitarian Ministers were present to address the meeting. The records do not indicate how long that first session lasted, but they do tell us that as a result of that evening, regular Sunday evening services were held in Summit, under the leadership of the ministers of the Unitarian Churches in Montclair and Orange. With the coming of the spring, the group was so sure of itself, that it convinced the Rev. Frederic Curtis Brown to move to Summit and become their regular minister, and to conduct morning services.

However, it was not until January of 1908 that a meeting was called to consider formal organization of a Unitarian Church. Now you would think that after a year of regular services, and after having induced a minister to move to Summit to serve the congregation, the question of whether or not to organize a church would be a mere formality. But, of course, nothing is ever a mere formality with Unitarian Universalists. The meeting seemed unable to come to a decision. There was clear reluctance to take this final formal step, to commit themselves, to constitute themselves as a church. (There is no record of what the Rev. Mr. Brown must have been thinking as he watched his congregation hesitate at the brink.) Finally, one member was seized by a brilliant inspiration. Rising to his feet, Mr. Hinman offered the following motion: Resolved: that "we do NOT organize the Unitarian Church in Summit." Immediately, the indecision evaporated. The meeting overwhelmingly defeated the resolution and the The Unitarian Church in Summit came into being.

Now, I am not at all certain that this negative vote would pass the careful scrutiny of parliamentarians who truly understand Roberts' Rules of Order, but it was sufficient to launch our congregation on its way. As I read this story, I find myself wondering just what was in the minds of the eight men and nine women who created this institution and who became its charter members. What did it mean to them to have a liberal church in

Summit--why were they eager enough that they separated themselves out from the rest of the religious community in this town and why were they so reluctant to commit themselves to establishing the church that they virtually backed into it? What were the dreams that lured them and what were the fears that disturbed them?

The histories of the church offer no direct answer to these questions, but after reading the subsequent development of the institution, it is possible to make some conjectures. Clearly, these women and men were individualists, who were determined to think for themselves. They rejected the creeds and the dogmas which had characterized conventional religious thought. They affirmed the right and the responsibility of each person to wrestle with important questions and make his or her own way to reasonable answers. They believed firmly in the role of education to broaden the mind and provide the challenge necessary to guard against fanaticism and show the way to responsible living. All of this can be seen in the early history of the church, when, only three years old, the church began its Religious Education program for its children, and shortly thereafter an adult education program focused upon a series of public lectures, open to the community and centered around important topics of the day.

But at the same time, these forebears of ours seem to have been suspicious of institutions and wondered if it were not possible, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, to "resolve to be a Unitarian alone." I imagine that they were not anxious to take on the responsibility for a whole group of people, some of whom would likely embarrass or disappoint them. Coming regularly to services was one thing. Organizing a church and committing themselves to its support, being identified with it was something else again--something they could not do without a great deal of thought. It took the threat of the loss of their community--a loss implicit in Mr. Hinman's motion not to organize a church--to convince them that the risks of the institution were to be preferred over the alternative.

Subsequent history would prove that there was some justification in their fear. Over the years, this congregation, which had a minister before it had a building or an organization, has prospered and suffered from strong ministerial leadership. Those ministers have encouraged, challenged, delighted, angered frustrated and embarrassed the Unitarian Church in Summit from time to time.

In April of 1917, when the United States entered the First World War, the minister of the Unitarian Church in Summit was the Rev. Dr. Frank Carlton Doan. Dr. Doan, a staunch pacifist, had made his opposition to the war known from his pulpit and in the larger community. The community at large ridiculed and denounced Dr. Doan and his congregation. A gentle man, Dr. Doan offered to resign in order to avoid any further embarrassment to the church. The Board of Trustees met to consider Dr. Doan's offer of resignation, and after careful consideration, adopted and published the following statement:

The Trustees of All Soul's Church of Summit, New Jersey, in view of newspaper comment and various current rumors, and in justice both to their minister, Dr. Frank Carleton Doan, and to themselves, wish to put on record their admiration for his sincerity,

tolerance, courage, idealism and loyalty to the best as he sees it.

While by far the larger part of his congregation is not in agreement with his views regarding peace and war, they believe in a broad tolerance of opinion and in freedom of pulpit utterance.

Nothing that Dr. Doan has said is capable of interpretation as treason or disloyalty to his country.

The Trustees believe that there is more danger today in attempts to suppress honest opinion than there is in a frank and free expression of sincere pacifism.

Let us not see the ghost of Benedict Arnold in every phrase which is not sufficiently war-like to satisfy our emotions. Let us rather respect an honest man whether he agrees with us or not. In short, while fighting one form of tyranny, let us beware lest we build up another.

The Trustees have no thought of accepting Dr. Doan's offer to resign.

That was, of course, not the end of the matter. When the graduating class of Summit High School voted in 1919 to ask Dr. Doan to preach their baccalaureate sermon, the Summit School Board forbade it because of his pacifism. One need not have been there to know that the division between Summit Unitarians and their neighbors must have been uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the Unitarian Church in Summit, when tested, knew what its values were, and what its role in this community was to be--to be a free voice, in good times and bad, offering a platform to unconventional and sometimes unpopular opinions.

Nor was this the last time that the Unitarian Church in Summit would be made uncomfortable by its ministers. In 1933, the Unitarian Church called as its minister a man who would prove to be the most eloquent Unitarian preacher of his day, The Rev. A. Powell Davies. Davies was more than eloquent; he was outspoken and unafraid and he knew how to attract the press. He openly championed birth control in an era which jailed people for making contraceptives available. He advocated a world-wide "Federal Union of Democracies" as a way to peace in the world. He urged co-operation rather than confrontation with the Soviet Union as the only practical way to avoid global tragedy. He was an outspoken champion of atheists, agnostics and free-thinkers. And so effective was he as a preacher and writer that his sermons and his ideas often made their way into print and became the focus of public discussion. Dr. Davies was a man who could delight some, infuriate others and embarrass still others.

After eleven years, Dr. Davies resigned to accept a pulpit in Washington, D.C. and was replaced by Jacob Trapp, a humanist minister from the west. More of a poet than his predecessor, Dr. Trapp served this church for twenty-five tumultuous and eventful years--years of the Civil Rights Revolution and the Anti-war movement and the Women's movement. Dr. Trapp's gentle but stubborn support of all those movements helped define this church, helped to change this city, and sometimes caused embarrassment and

discomfort to his parishioners. And then came Deane Starr, whose outspoken opposition to the Vietnam war caused deep discomfort among some members.

And even the present incumbents, one of whom, in the midst of national celebration over victory in the Gulf War, draped black ribbon this pulpit and denounced that war, both of whom are openly and stubbornly critical of the religions of the Book, who have championed same sex marriages, and been highly critical of conventional economic and social policies, even the current incumbents have caused some people to wonder from time to time if they really want to be identified with this institution and its determined openness to unconventional thinking and its frequent opposition to conventional wisdom. And yet, through it all, the congregation has been remarkably clear about its commitment to freedom and reason and tolerance as the essential hallmarks of liberal religion. And by its steadfastness to those principles, it has tempered the character of this community. But that is now the only reason it has survived.

Early in its history, indeed, in December of 1912, the Unitarian Church in Summit merged with the Universalist Society to become All Souls Church--Unitarian Universalist. The records of that merger are skimpy--hinted at in Parker D. King's early history of the church, and referred to in George Marshall's biography of A. Powell Davies. But despite the lack of clear records, I must conclude that the Universalists added to the Unitarian concern for freedom and reason and tolerance a strong and abiding commitment to love as the central value of the institution. For as long as I have known this church, there has been a tension between our determination to be clear about who we are and what we believe, our commitment to freedom of utterance and our determination to protect individual integrity, on the one hand, and our concern for maintaining the community on the other. We have survived because, from the beginning we have been deeply mindful in our institutional life of the words of the great Universalist prophet, Hosea Ballou's, who said:

If we agree inlove, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury; but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good....Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

From the beginning we have known that there are no guarantees for our existence, that we represent a minority tradition within the western religious community, that our survival depends upon two things--that we be true to that tradition and that we be true to and care for each other. This place, built when the congregation was only five years old, has housed generations of people who have prized truth and honesty, reason and integrity, and each other. Here, in this place, we have laughed together, and wept together, dreamed together and mourned together. Here, in this place, we have welcomed and named our our children; here in this place, we have celebrated marriages and shared moments of high joy; here in this place, we have come seeking solace in times of deep and bitter disappointment and despair. Here, in this place we have remembered our dead and celebrated their lives and shared our grief at their loss. Here, in this place, we have sought to understand what it means to live lives of deep meaning and high moral purpose, what it means to be human and to seek to structure a humane society, what it means to

strive and sometimes to fail, what it means to be magnanimous in success and forgiving of failure. Here we have argued and debated and sought to define a faith and to explore what that faith requires of us in a world which is too often brutal and callous and uncaring.

For ninety years, in this town we have sought to demonstrate that the essence of religion is concerned, not with doctrines and dogmas, but with how we live together, one human race on this beautiful and fragile planet, how we live with our neighbors across the street and our brothers and sisters across the planet. For ninety years in this town, we have sought to embody the conviction that no one possesses the truth, but that we are more likely to approach the truth when we are free to share our different visions openly and honestly with one another. For ninety years we have sought to incarnate the conviction that though we may never know if there is a God, whatever is holy is to be found in the common and the ordinary, and looks out at us through the eyes of neighbors and friends and strangers; is encountered in the persons of other human beings for whom we have an endless responsibility.

This, I choose to believe, was the vision which possessed those seventeen men and women--the charter members who dreamed this church into being almost ninety years ago. It was this dream which caused them to embrace all the problems and challenges and difficulties which accompany the creation and the maintenance of any institution, and particularly a liberal religious institution. They knew, deep in their hearts, that Thomas Jefferson's words to the contrary notwithstanding, there is something inherently contradictory in the notion of being "a Unitarian alone." We need each other to challenge our thinking, to develop deeper and richer insights, to support and encourage each other in the search for a moral and meaningful life, to draw out of us the best it is in us to be. And above all, we need the support and encouragement of a loving community in which we are accepted and embraced, despite all our warts and blemishes. That was the church they dreamed. That was the church they planted all those years ago. That is the church we still strive to become.

Ninety years ago, a group of men and women gathered in the Odd Fellows' Hall for the first of a series of Unitarian Meetings out of which this church would grow. We do not know precisely what was in their minds, what hopes possessed them, but we do know their history. Now, ninety years later, we dare hope that we have been true to the vision that possessed them, that the dream curled in the seed they planted has grown and flourished in ways which would surprise and astound them, but that it has become a reality which would make them proud.

Now, ninety years later, we, possessed of a dream not much different from theirs, continue and enlarge upon their work, in the hope that their tradition may continue to enrich the lives of individuals and the larger community. We do not know that the future will bring, or what it will demand of us. We seek to be true to the history out of which we have come, the tradition which has shaped us, the vision which has lured us. And like Jacob Trapp, we dare to sing, "Wonders still the world shall witness, never known in days of old."